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ABSTRACT

One of the critical elements of children's healthy development is the participation of parents in important activities in their children's lives. This research brief reports on the involvement of fathers in their children's lives. The brief focuses on the involvement of fathers who live with their children, including single fathers raising their children, in four key areas: (1) general activities; (2) school activities; (3) limit-setting; and (4) religious activities. The data sources were the 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the 1999 National Household Education Survey, and the 1996 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Findings from these studies suggest that fathers are likely to be actively engaged in a variety of activities with their children at least once a week, ranging from 25 percent of fathers helping their children build or repair something to 72 percent talking with children about their family. In 1999, between 24 and 33 percent of fathers were highly involved in school activities, depending on the child's age. Fathers with higher levels of education were more likely to report high school involvement than were fathers with less education. More than half the fathers worked on homework with their child at least once a week. In 1997, fathers reported that they often or very often set limits fo their children. Almost 30 percent of adolescents in 1996 reported attending a church-related event with their father in the past month. Fathers who were college graduates were more likely to engage their children in religious activities than fathers with less education. Both parents were more likely to provide religious guidance when children were between 11 and 14 years than when they were older. (Contains 30 endnotes.) (KB)

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Child TRENDS
RESEARCH BRIEF

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Fathers' Activities with Their Kids

By Brett V. Brown, Ph.D., Erik A. Michelsen, Tamara G. Halle, Ph.D., and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D.

June 2001

Common sense suggests, and research confirms, that one of the critical elements of children's healthy development is the participation of parents in important activities in their children's lives. Mothers and fathers who are consistently and positively involved in their children's lives help them to grow up with a strong sense of self, a feeling of security, and a host of other positive characteristics.

In most U.S. families, mothers generally are the parents who are most engaged in activities with the children. But in this month that is set aside for celebrating fathers, it seems especially appropriate to recognize that many fathers are very much engaged as well. Fathers may be involved in their children's lives in somewhat different ways than mothers, but many fathers are carrying a significant part of the parenting load. At the same time, we must acknowledge that there are some fathers who have infrequent or no contact with their children.

This Research Brief brings together data from multiple sources to report on the involvement of fathers in their children's lives in four key areas: general activities, school activities, limit-setting, and religious activities. The data sources are the 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the 1999 National Household Education Survey (NHES), and the 1996 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).[1] A more extensive statistical profile of fathers will be available from Child Trends in late 2001.

It is important to keep in mind that the data used in this Research Brief are only for fathers who live with their children, including single fathers raising children; far less data are available on nonresident fathers.

DOING THINGS TOGETHER

When parents are involved in activities with their children, they are (often unconsciously) contributing to their children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. These activities can range from the academic to sports and games to simply going to the store or doing household chores together. Consider the case of parent-child literacy activities in the home, such as helping children recognize letters, reading to children, or assisting children with reading and writing assignments. Such activities have been found to improve children's language skills and heighten their interest in books.[2] A similar pattern emerges for number-related skills. Research shows that when parents and children engage in higher-level number activities together (for example, playing counting games or figuring out math puzzles together), children's

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performance on tests of early mathematical ability is stronger.[3] In a different arena, fathers' participation in play activities with their children has been found to be particularly important in forging a secure parent-child relationship.[4]

Reading, Puzzles, Sports, and Other "Ordinary" Pastimes

Parenting is seen in many U.S. households as a team effort, with each parent participating in activities with children according to his or her own special interests and abilities. Research suggests that, in practical terms, parental involvement tends to be aligned along traditional gender roles. In 1997, for example, 25 percent of fathers, compared with 13 percent of mothers, reported they helped their children build or repair something at least once a week. Similarly, 68 percent of fathers, compared with 54 percent of mothers, reported they played sports or did outdoor activities with their children at least once a week.[5]

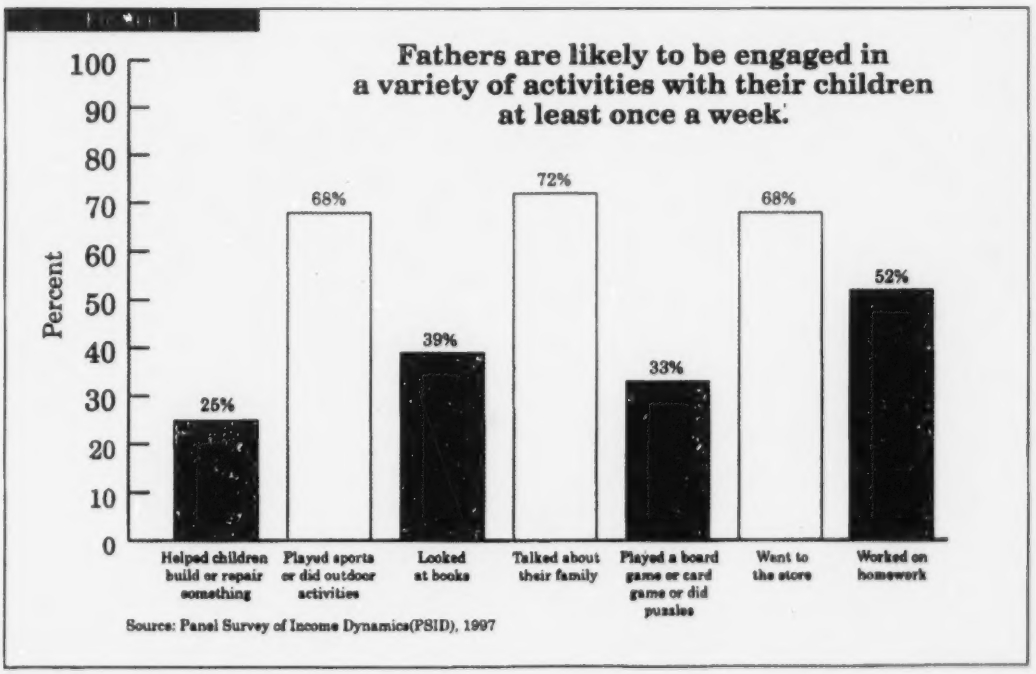
Looking at a number of other examples provides further evidence that despite the pressures of contemporary life, many modern-day fathers remain actively engaged in activities with their children (see Figure 1). In 1997:

- 39 percent of fathers reported they read or looked at books with their children at least once a week;
- 72 percent of fathers reported they talked about their family with their children at least once a week;
- 33 percent of fathers reported they played a board game or card game or did puzzles with their children at least once a week; and
- 68 percent of fathers reported they went to the store with their children at least once a week.[6]

In two out of four of these examples, then, more than half of America's fathers reported that they were engaged in these activities with their children.

BEING INVOLVED IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING

Studies report that children whose parents are involved in their schooling are more likely to



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earn high grades and enjoy school than children whose parents are not involved. This result holds for students across both elementary and secondary education.[7] Children of involved parents are also more likely to have higher educational aspirations and motivation to achieve.[8] In addition, research suggests that children of involved parents are less likely to have behavior problems in school, as measured by suspensions and expulsions. Such children are also more likely to participate in extracurricular activities.[9]

The School Front

The data show that fathers of children between the ages of 3 and 17 are about half as likely as mothers to report being highly engaged in school activities as measured by four markers: attending a general school meeting, participating in a parent-teacher conference, participating in a class event, and volunteering at school. A "highly involved father" is considered one who is engaged in three or four of these activities. Here, as elsewhere in this brief, we are examining fathers who live with their children. In 1999:

- 24 percent of fathers of children between the ages of 3 and 5 reported that they had been highly involved in school activities;
- 33 percent of fathers of children between the ages of 6 and 11 reported that they had been highly involved in school activities; and
- 26 percent of fathers of children between the ages of 12 and 17 reported that they had been highly involved in school activities.[10]

In addition to the fathers who are very involved in school activities, other fathers are somewhat or occasionally involved. This lower level of involvement may reflect the fact that fathers, on average, work longer hours than mothers and may thus have less time available for school activities than mothers.

Fathers with higher levels of education were generally more likely to report high involvement in their children's schools. Consider the case of fathers of 6- to 11-year-olds; again the data are for *resident fathers*. In 1999, 45 percent of those who were college graduates reported involvement in school activities, compared with 36 percent of fathers with some college or vocational/technical training, 24 percent of fathers who had earned a high school diploma or GED, and 10 percent of fathers who had not finished high school.[11]

The Home Front

While a quarter to a third of fathers are frequent visitors to their children's schools for various activities, many more fathers express their involvement in their children's schooling by helping with homework. Data for 1997 show that more than half of all resident fathers (52 percent) reported they worked on homework with their child or children at least once a week (see Figure 1).[12]

SETTING LIMITS

Setting guidelines or rules teaches children the difference between right and wrong and clarifies what kind of behavior is considered acceptable and what is not. Research supports the idea that limit-setting constitutes a critical element in shaping children's judgment, developing a conscience, and learning how to understand one's surroundings.[13] Limit-setting not only enhances children's development, but also reduces children's risk of injury or harm and increases the likelihood of compliance with parental expectations.[14,15] Moreover, it has been found that authoritative parenting (i.e., that which is firm but also responsive to a child's needs) is particularly associated with positive outcomes in children.[16]

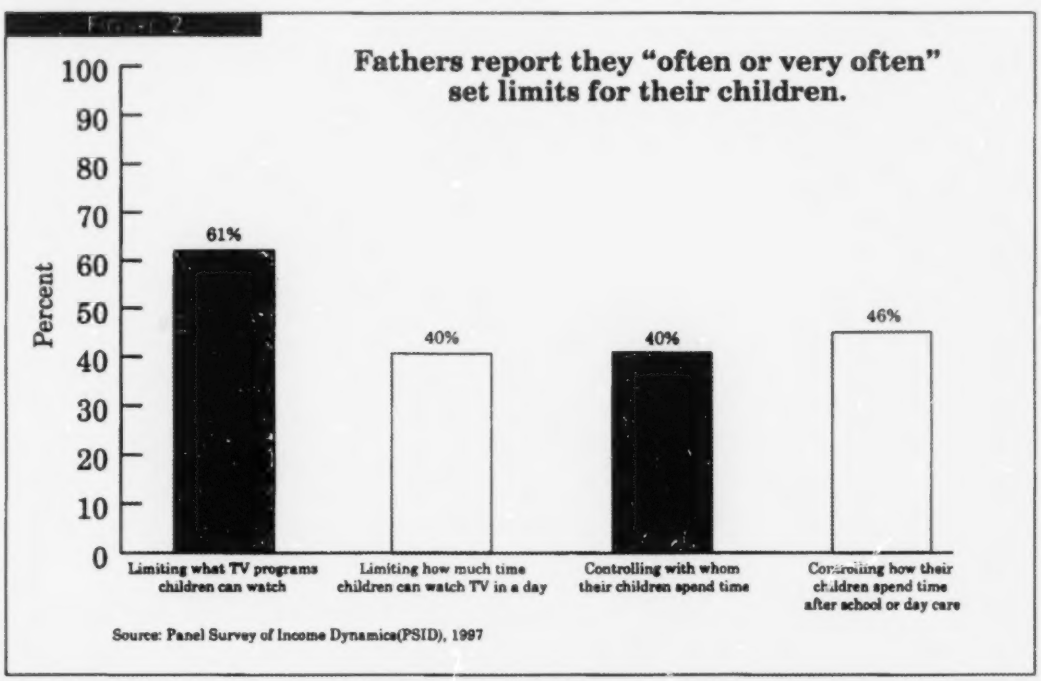
"No More TV Tonight"

Fathers and mothers are both highly involved in the job of setting limits and providing structure for their children. Television viewing is a good example. Survey data for 1997 show that the majority of parents report they set limits on what programs their children watch. Research shows that 61 percent of fathers and 71 percent of mothers reported they "often or very often" set limits on what TV programs their children watch. Forty percent of fathers and 48 percent of

mothers reported they "often or very often" set limits on how much time their children can watch TV in a day.[17]

Checking up and Keeping Tabs

Monitoring what children do with their time and with whom they spend time have become hallmarks of responsible parenting. Data show that (among resident parents) both mothers and fathers perform this monitoring role. Forty percent of fathers report they control with whom their children spend time "often or very often," and 46 percent of fathers report they control how their children spend time after school or day care "often or very often" (see Figure 2). [18]



Moreover, more than half of fathers (65 percent) report that they "often or very often" set a time for their children to do their homework. And more than half of fathers (67 percent) report they discuss limit-setting rules with their children "often or very often."[19]

PARTICIPATING IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Many people regard regular attendance at a house of worship and other types of religious participation as important ways to instill moral values in children and guide their spiritual development. Higher parental religiosity is associated with more cohesive family relationships, lower levels of conflict between parents, and fewer behavior problems among children.[20] In turn, higher family cohesion is related to children being more likely to view the family as the primary source of moral authority.[21] Religiosity also has been found to be positively related to a number of other attributes that are beneficial to children: volunteering,[22] quality mother-child relationships,[23] openness, and friendliness.[24]

Children and Religion

Evidence suggests that mothers' personal religious practices are a more powerful predictor of children's religiosity than are those of their fathers.[25] Yet, at the same time, research suggests that a significant portion of men express a deeper commitment to religion and a greater involvement in religious activities after becoming fathers.[26]

The data show that both fathers and mothers of children in grades 7 through 12 are involved

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in religious activities with their children, as reported by the children. For example, in 1996, 29 percent of females and 28 percent of males in this age category reported having gone to a church-related event with their father in the last four weeks. A somewhat larger percentage (39 percent of female respondents and 34 percent of male respondents) reported having gone to a church-related event with their mother.[27] Again, these figures are for *resident parents* only.

As with many other kinds of parental involvement, data show that fathers who are college graduates are more likely to engage their children in religious activities than fathers who have gone less far in school. Moreover, regardless of their educational attainment, both fathers and mothers are more likely to provide religious guidance for their children and share in religious activities with them when the children are younger (between 11 and 14) than as they move toward adulthood.[28]

CONCLUSION

Each year, as Father's Day rolls around, a lot of sentiment is expressed about Dear Ol' Dad. That's not surprising. Fathers make a difference. They play a multitude of roles in the lives of their children. These roles include acting as economic provider; caregiver and nurturer; moral teacher and role model; friend and playmate; monitor and disciplinarian; protector; advocate; provider of emotional and practical support to mothers; and provider of linkages to the extended family and the community.[29]

This *Research Brief* has presented some specific examples of father involvement in the lives of their children. Helping children with homework; taking them to a service at a church, synagogue, or mosque; monitoring their television viewing; or simply tossing around a ball or helping with a crafts project might seem as if they are "nothing special." But such actions can help children feel special. Indeed, research supports the idea that such parental involvement is an important factor in shaping children's healthy development. Even though fathers, on average, are less likely than mothers to be engaged in activities with their children, many fathers *are* involved, and their involvement should be acknowledged and encouraged. That involvement *matters*.

At the same time, we should not forget that while there are fathers who personify the modern all-involved Dad, there are other fathers who seldom or never see their children. This is cause for concern, not only because children need the financial support of their absent parents, but also because both children and parents benefit from warm and supportive relationships.[30] The challenge is to find creative approaches and opportunities to foster this kind of involvement.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children and families. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available research briefs, please visit our Web site, www.childtrends.org.

The data presented in this brief, along with substantial additional information comparing the behaviors and attitudes of mothers and fathers, will be included in a new Child Trends' data book that is due out at the end of the year.

Child Trends gratefully acknowledges the Ford Foundation, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics for their support of this project. We also thank the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for support of our *Research Brief* series.

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Endnotes

[1] The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the National Household Education Survey (NHES) are based on the responses of one adult for an entire household; the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) study asks questions of teens in a household.

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